Ramadan's challenge for all Australians

2 Comments
Andrew Hamilton | 25 June 2014

Muslims in Australia will begin the Ramadan fast on this coming Sunday. Most Australians will categorise it as a private religious practice. But it is significant precisely because it raises questions for all Australians about the place of religion in public life.

For Muslims, the observance of Ramadan touches the whole of life. It commemorates the month in which Mohammad began to receive revelations. They were gathered in the Quran, the definitive charter for the personal and public life of Muslims.

The practices associated with Ramadan do not simply touch the mind but also the body, committing people to fast from sunrise to sunset. Nor does it have implications simply for personal life. To adjust to fasting and giving time to prayer and reading the Quran throughout the working day has consequences for one's work, as many footballers at the World Cup can testify.

Nor is Ramadan simply about individual practice. It is highly social. Preparations for eating before and after sunset becomes a family industry. And the commitment to give alms is political in the broad sense — it invites people to look at the world around them, to notice people who need aid, and to ask why they are suffering.

So at Ramadan fasting is the symbol of a deeper commitment to focus on what matters and to ask what God wants. For Muslims it is a time for correcting bad habits, mending relationships, reading the Quran and praying, giving alms to the poor, and meeting people. It is about serious business, but it is not a private business.

The seriousness of this quest to recognise what matters and to live by it is a gift and a challenge to all Australians because it invites us to ask how we deal with these questions ourselves. It challenges Christians in particular because they share with Muslims a tradition of symbolising the search for God's will in public ways.

In earlier Catholic societies and some Eastern churches today Lent had the same public character as Ramadan, involving serious fasting, communal prayer and spiritual reflection. It was a time for conversion that also made a statement of public identity. Many Catholics went to the early morning Mass on Ash Wednesday and wore the ash mark on their foreheads for the rest of the day. Now it makes less demands, hardly drawing public notice.

The change in Lenten practice in the West reflects a recurrent tidal change in religious practice. The practices of both Lent and Ramadan reflect and nurture the desire to live with great integrity in personal and public life. But the risk inherent in public devotional practices is that the practices can be seen as a goal in themselves rather than as a symbol of deep personal commitment. This leads to a discrepancy between religious practice and life, and invites a charge of hypocrisy.

The discrepancy leads reformers to criticise the narrow focus on external things and to call for a return to the large things that matter. In the Christian Gospels, for example, Jesus criticised the emphasis placed on dietary laws because it stifled the life it was meant to nurture. Later movements of reform have taken up the same charge and emphasised inner devotion over outward observance.

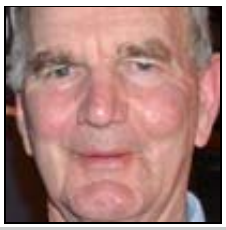
The risk inherent in focusing on purity of heart, of course, is that faith can become privatised, with the result that the quest to find and live by what matters is seen as purely internal and so a matter for private choice. In reaction, new symbols of commitment and adherence are found. There is a periodic alternation between symbol-making and symbol-breaking.

The challenge that Ramadan makes to a secular society lies precisely in its bodily, public and communal symbols of the importance of commitment to what matters in personal and public life. Our society has over a long period been engaged in symbol-breaking. Long established rituals and practices are deconstructed and statements of universal values are routinely criticised for their pretensions. Religion and its symbols are understood to belong in the private sphere.

This process might lead us to ask whether it will be possible in the public sphere to ask seriously what matters to human beings and to society, or whether these large questions will be regarded as a matter for private conversations and irrelevant to public policy.

If the latter is the case, the symbols of public life will embody power without respect for universal values like truth or justice. Parliament will be represented not by the prayer that initiates it but by the verbal abuse that follows; counsel will be represented by the appointment not of wise people, but of loyal creatures; opportunity will be represented by wealth, not by reason.

Ramadan offers a different view; it might give all Australians pause.



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